

# UNSHAPELY THINGS

BY FRANCIS HACKETT

HE CERTAINLY was suffering. It was written on his pale, rather puffy young face. Not all the pride of his jade-colored muffler nor the tilt of his hat could disguise the sort of dejected croup his body seemed to be giving, nor hide the round apprehensive animosity of his eyebrow and his eye.

No one had recognized Willoughby at the depot. That, at any rate, was to the good. He had hung back for a few wobbly minutes to let the crowd make its getaway, the queer, dowdy, slow bilge of a crowd. Why did the elderly women in black have to protrude so? It was hideous. And why did so many of them have to carry oranges and knitting and sodden ham sandwiches in little wicker baskets, which the children also used?

They shuffled out into the asperity of the December noon, and Willoughby hung miserably behind them. He hated the much-trodden, much-handled, scrofulous ticket-office. He had always hated it, and though it was three years since he'd been home, it was just the same as ever, he hated it just the same. He couldn't bear to go into the toilet, with its greenish painted walls, and half-wiped out obscenities, which he always read. Until the cars and people were gone outside, he'd wait in the draughty ticket-office, and smoke a cigarette.

As he stood on the threshold, buttoning his soft wool overcoat and pulling his hat over his eyes, he shivered at the prospect before him. His cheeks were still burning from the train, and his body was hot, but his hands and his feet were frozen, and he felt rotten from having had to be up so early to catch his train from New York.

But it wasn't physical, his suffering. It wasn't the unlovely landscape before him in the gritty light—an earth rudely disemboweled, dried weeds impeding defunct newspapers in their effort to bury themselves, and flowering out of this horror a crop of screaming one-story buildings. It hurt Willoughby to see these things, but the really painful prospect was up the hill, out of sight, in that home to which he was returning, the home where his father was waiting for him.

"My heart has goose flesh!" he said to himself. "How did I ever live in this hole?"

The wonder of this accident occupied Willoughby as he walked up the hill. Luckily it was noon, and people were eating lunch or something. The streets were practically empty, so that, by switching his nose as a sort of tiller the minute he thought he was being identified, he never at any one moment offered more than a disappearing profile, and thus averted any excessive ovation. But his speed in walking—a rapid uneven lurch that remained pre-war in spite of everything, but that carried him along—saved him from being greeted while at the same time, O good God, it brought him nearer home.

Where would he eat? He hadn't been mad enough to try the buffet, with its zincy coffee. But to eat home—no! He'd stop at a lunch-room. The Palace Lunch. A name in white porcelain, a clouded window through which red and green foods flagged the public, a door that opened on a moist spongy warmth, and many odors almost revolted Willoughby in an indecorous manner. He sincerely hated it. But it was that or his mother's cooking.

He tried clam chowder, and wished he hadn't. "Tastes metallic." Then he ordered black coffee, and cream. A baked apple consoled him. "Real. Something is still real."

They wouldn't be worrying about him, he knew that, and this delay was worth it. He felt stronger to meet his father, after the three years. His mother? Well, poor old thing, she was so self-effacing it didn't matter so much. It was Daddie that mattered, and especially now.

Willoughby braced himself for the awful plunge into the domestic atmosphere. All the way down Conger street he kept telling himself he'd have to be sympathetic anyhow. "But I'll catch the six train back, damn it. I have to get back to town!"

## II

His mother opened the door.

"There you are," she said, looking up at him and putting her arms around his neck, mixing herself up with his hat and his muffler, "we kind of expected you."

Mrs. Putney was small and lean, with glasses raised on to her brow, which always remained there, even when she was reading. She had a slight pretension to prettiness in the white collar to her grey dress, but it was furtive and ineffectual. Her appearance was not improved by carpet slippers of a vast size.

"How is father?" Willoughby inquired, as he went into the "setting" room. The house was warm, anyway. He had shed his coat with relief, and blew his nose to fill up the blank in conversation.

"You'll see for yourself, Willoughby. He's had his bad spells, but he'll tell you. I'm afraid you'll be cold. We've had trouble with the furn—."

"No, it's lovely. Really. Oh, there's the *Zodiac*."

"Yes, we get it. We lent your piece to Mr. Samson, and he brought it back yesterday. No, it was day before yesterday."

"Did he like it, mother?" A tiny edge came into Willoughby's voice. And then he added, nonchalantly, "Poor old Sam, I

guess he didn't make much of it, did he?"

"Well, Willoughby, you know us; we're not up to those sort of things. It's too high-brow for me, I guess. But Mr. Samson is very proud of you. He said he enjoyed it very much, indeed."

Her sincerity was certain. Then she said, after the tiniest discreet interval, "I've never asked you if you was hungry. I was all ready for you. It's waiting downstairs."

"No, no," Willoughby said, raising his hand. "Stop, mother, I have eaten. I didn't want to give you the trouble."

"Oh, but Willoughby, the nurse got it for you. It's no trouble. And it is really very dainty. Can't you have a little?"

He shook his head. "No, really. Thanks a lot."

"Then, I think father's expecting you. Maybe," and she waited hesitatingly.

"Go ahead. I'll follow you up."

He followed her up the narrow stairs, to the big room on the next floor, the room he was born in and the room his father now occupied.

"Will, boy. Come in. Let me have a look at you."

The father, his beard as white as the pillow-case, lifted himself on one elbow. His temples were sunken, and his eyes hollow, the skin around them almost transparent.

"Don't tire yourself, father," Mrs. Putney admonished in a firm voice. "Don't let him tire himself, Willoughby."

"Gracious sakes, I'm not tiring myself. You look fine, Will."

He gave up the effort of looking, with a lurch, and Willoughby was too late to help him easily down.

"Glad to see you, Dad," said Willoughby at the head of the bed, gazing down at the emaciated face, while his father, his eyes faintly filmed and yet wide open, sent up a glance that had in it a queer vacancy and yet a fixed intention, like a feeble hand clutching into the air.

"It's . . . the last you'll see of your old Dad, Will. That's a sure thing," and the words mumbled into nothingness.

"Sit down, Willoughby. It'll be easier for him. Now, don't tire yourself, father. He's here now, and you can take your time."

The man in the bed said nothing. He plucked at the bedclothes with bluish hands, to pull them up around his shoulders. He was cold. But the bedclothes did not obey his tug, and he hadn't the strength to pull them, and he gave up, rolling his eyes a little and then closing them.

Willoughby waited a second, and then tip-toed over to his mother, who was mixing a drink at the wash-stand.

"He's terribly thin, isn't he?"

"Oh, he's been that way for three months. He's just a shadow. You'd be surprised how light he is. I can . . ."

"I know," Willoughby cut in, "but it can't be good for him, the excitement."

The young man's face was uneasy.

"No, no, Willoughby, you sit still. I'll give him the mixture, and he'll be all right for a few hours anyway. He likes to have you around."

Willoughby pulled his collar with a kind of nervous jerk. He suffered at the thought of being in this room much longer, unless he could be "some good."

"If I could be some good," he mumbled.

"You are some good," his mother said, without the faintest dryness. "Just you sit there by the head of the bed."

Willoughby tip-toed back to his chair by the head of the bed in the corner. His father's eyes were still closed. The skin of his face was a terrible hue, an ivory that looked as if it had been bleached for centuries and yet had the stain of earth-mold in it. Only the little blue veins, a pallid blue, showed that there was still blood in that feeble frame.

"Are you still there, boy?"

"Yes, Dad."

There was silence. And then Mrs. Putney came over with a drink.

The ceremony of the drink required her to slip her arm behind Mr. Putney's head and lift him up, and, while he was propped up with his head lying on her flat bosom, to feed him his drink very slowly,

guiding his faltering yet assertive hand.

As he drank the dark fluid, his eyes opened. "'T's better," he blurted between the spoon and the glass. "'Anks, mother," and he sank back.

She put away the glass, and, as Willoughby politely made way for her, she returned and tucked in the sick man, covering the sharp points of his skinny shoulders with three thicknesses of bedclothes, so that he gave her a grateful glance.

"Tell me about yourself." His voice was almost curt. "How are you making out?"

How am I making out? Willoughby did not know what to say. Making out? In money? In work? In reputation? Was his father thinking of his book, "The Cadaver and Other Tales," or was he thinking of his criticism, especially his withering criticism of Walt Whitman, which had at last wiped out forever the illusions of all the poor fools who mix up art and ideas.

"Oh, pretty good, Dad. Nothing to kick about."

"I read that piece on Whitman."

Willoughby was silent. His father, he had forgotten, was a bit of a crank on Whitman. Well!

"You didn't like it? I can guess that."

"No, it's not that. I—you know. I always liked Walt Whitman. But I could see. You know."

Mrs. Putney, by the wash-stand, spoke up.

"That's right, Willoughby. He thought it was real clever, what you said. But," her voice sank, "he made me read him Whitman that night, just the same."

"When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed." I always fell for that, Will."

Like a voice in a key that reached a sensitive nerve, these confessions rasped something in Willoughby's soul. Whitman, yes, yes, but they didn't see the point, they didn't see! Whitman had to be disposed of. There seemed to him something bordering on the foolish in the words that had just come out of this muffled, sunken mouth. He had tried hard to make his own ideas clear, his idea that poetry should be pure,

his idea that it should have no ideas. And here he had to meet it on the plane where loyalties intersect, and so on. He squirmed. He had his loyalties, too, his fierce æsthetic loyalties. But what was the use? The bourgeoisie are the bourgeoisie, even if they are your father and mother.

Half-cocking his free eye at Willoughby, the old man realized that his son was having pity for him, and on him, and he was glad he was being shown pity. He thought his boy was clever, oh, marvelously clever. He thought he was a sort of Human Fly who could find foothold where no other human being had ever found foothold, and he rejoiced that no one had ever seemed to be able to dislodge Willoughby, in all the articles he ever read on the same themes. But his own notions on these things—holy mackerel! he didn't think to oppose them to Willoughby's, he didn't have the vitality or anything, he didn't have a dog's chance in any argument with Willoughby, and he never knew any fellow who could argue so much as his son, argue on both sides at the same time if need be. He often laughed at that, but always behind the boy's back. But now, now, under the mountains that lay on him, under the tons of weight that crushed him, he just let the whole thing fade away, drift away, ease . . . away . . . from him. He'd sleep.

"Sleep a bit," he mumbled, and closed his eyes.

"You'd like a cup of tea," Willoughby's mother whispered at her son's elbow, "just to keep you going," and she led him out of the room.

### III \

Down in the basement, on the oil-cloth table covering, Mrs. Putney gave her son a cup of tea. It was green tea, which he didn't like, and the cups were of the same watery white as the milk itself, while the cake crumbled with its excess of soda; but Willoughby accepted these things with a subdued deference. He wasn't thinking of them. He was thinking of his father.

His father was dying. He could see that.

He wondered he was still alive. And in the face of his father's dying, their least acts seemed to be tied with invisible cords that tugged and knotted and tangled, till he choked with the confusion of his feelings. He hadn't anything, he couldn't find anything, to say.

His mother's hands spoke for her, as she served him, and he tried dumbly to answer in the same language, by picking up the tea-things and carting them out to the kitchen. The kitchen, too, was cheerless. But it was not so cheerless as his own sense of himself. He tried for words, and he found he had no words.

"I'm afraid it's been bad for him."

"Oh, Willoughby, you're wrong, child. He's been looking forward to your coming. He needs to rest up a bit, that's all."

Willoughby pursed his face, looking into the sodless yard. If only his mother could express herself, could say something, could help him. But he knew it was hopeless, he looked out blindly on the dimming blank walls.

His mother spoke.

"We'll let him sleep now, till the nurse comes tonight."

"When does she come?"

"She's due at seven-thirty. Seven-thirty in the evening to eight-thirty in the morning. It lets me get a whole night's sleep. I didn't want to do it, Willoughby, but the doctor said there'd soon be two sick people in the house instead of one. You can see I lost weight."

She waited for confirmation, but Willoughby was silent.

"Of course, it's a big expense," she admitted weakly, "but we could see no way out."

Her words struck on Willoughby's tightened nerves like little hammer blows. Expense. He hadn't asked about that. But he didn't want to think about it. He had meant to be so sympathetic, so full of understanding, so intuitive. He suddenly felt overwhelmed. He didn't want to think about the sickroom, the long nights of nursing, the strange woman who was com-

ing at seven-thirty. "The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong too great to be told." That was Yeats. The line haunted him every second his mother was talking.

She was sitting now, looking at him. Willoughby moved his chair with a squeak and stood up.

"I wish I could stay on," he said with a cough, "but I had to plan to get back tonight. And there's only one good train. The six."

"Yes, that's the only good one," she stood up too. "Oh, it's not like seeing you at all, Willoughby. You can't spend the night?"

He had expected her to reproach him, and he put all the softness he could into his voice. "No, mother, you see, they're expecting me. I have to be on hand first thing tomorrow morning, and the other trains are so awful!" He stopped.

"We must go on back up to father." She led the way, her hand gliding up the bannister, her feet tolling each step with the same deliberate, efforted measure. Willoughby followed at the same pace, his head a maze of embroiled emotions.

The daylight had seeped away from the sickroom, and in its place there was a ghostly obscurity.

"I think he's still asleep," Mrs. Putney whispered. "Yes, I hear him."

Her son pulled her sleeve. He pointed to the door, and stole out on tip-toe. Outside on the landing he whispered, "Let him sleep. It's too cruel to wake him."

"Oh, but, Willoughby!"

Willoughby stole downstairs, followed by his mother, who descended with careful, uncertain steps.

"Oh, he'll feel so badly. I really think I ought to wake him. He'll find it hard to forgive me." She looked anxiously at her son, her hands together.

"No, no," he picked down his muffler, still whispering. "It's much better for him. It'd stir him up. I'll just slip away."

"You need a light," she said bewilderedly, turning around. "Where are the matches?"

Willoughby was half-way into his coat. "It's all right, I don't need a light." He took down his hat. "Good-bye, mother," and he kissed her, his cold nose touching her cheek.

#### IV

Once down the wooden stoop, Willoughby hurried. She might call to him. He pushed along Conger street with no emotion except to get to the corner.

Turning the corner into the brighter Hill street, he no longer dammed the feelings that had been gathering. Underneath his pain that was like a raw wound, he felt a mad mortification. He had not thought he'd find his father like this. He was all unprepared for it. The man was dying, that was sure, and he had never before seen anyone who was dying. Why hadn't he been told, why hadn't he been prepared? It was so unjust to him to have let him tumble in on this so suddenly, and what good could he be unless he knew what he had to look for? His mother and the nurse were doing everything anyway, he could only be clumsy, he wasn't used to such things. It was best to get away. But to get away was also painful. That was what confused him. They hadn't said a thing, of course, and, he couldn't tell, perhaps they wouldn't say anything. But it was hard, they made it hard, what was the good of his having come. They had so little in common.

All the way to the depot Willoughby churned with his feelings. It was all so sordid, so painful, so ugly. That was the thing. He pulled his jade-hued muffler tighter round him, his bird-like eye accusing the whole world of its ugliness. He shivered as he came down to the empty lots at the foot of the hill, the last blocks before the station. The station clock said 5.35 from its dirty face. Willoughby noted it while he continued his interior argument.

"When a man loves beauty the way I do," he said. He did not finish the sentence. Anyway, he was back at the depot, and he wanted to go right through to the platform.



# SHAFTER

BY OWEN P. WHITE

ON A bright, sunshiny morning in January I stepped off the stage at Shafter, Texas. Naturally, I was ashamed of my appearance, for I had on the same clothes that I had worn when, only a week before, I had dazzled Fifth avenue on my way to church. Thus I was not at all surprised when a tall, lean man separated himself from a group in front of the post-office, and came over and accosted me suspiciously.

He said: "Say stranger, you sure do look pretty, but what's your business in this town?"

I replied, very emphatically: "It ain't a damn bit of yours," whereupon the tall man jerked a long blue forty-five off his hip, poked it under my nose, and said: "It ain't, huh? Well, I'll damn quick find out about that!"

At home at last! Inwardly I rejoiced at the thought! Aloud I said: "Look here, pardner, you take that thing out of my face and do it now because otherwise I might get sore and make you eat the sights off it."

The long man lowered the gun and grinned. "Then you ain't no stranger?"

"Stranger, hell no! I was born out here, just this side of the Pecos. Where's the saloon?"

An hour later I knew everybody in town, and I also knew that I was at the one spot in the United States where something of the spirit of the old West was still alive.

Shafter is located in a "hole" in the mountains down in the Big Bend section of Texas. In other words, the town-site, which contains about two square miles, is a low gulch entirely surrounded by high

mountains. It is fifty miles from the nearest railroad and its only excuse for existence is a silver mine and a number of fairly good-sized cattle ranches.

Employed in the operations of the mine, at the time that I brightened the community by my arrival, were about twenty-five or thirty white men and between five and six hundred Mexicans. The town itself, built exclusively of adobe, boasted of two saloons, a general store, a pool-room and a dance-hall. Only a week before the surrounding mountains had filled up with Mexicans who had overflowed across the Rio Grande as a result of one of the endless conflicts on their own side. In addition to these undesirables, there were numbers of hard white men in the vicinity, all carrying on a rushing business buying and selling the smuggled and stolen stock brought in from Mexico.

There were very few framed marriage certificates on the walls of the homes that I entered, and an incident of my second day caused me to conclude that Shafter was probably the town Kipling had in mind when he said:

We asked no social questions and we pumped no  
hidden shame,  
We never talked obstetrics when the little stran-  
ger came;  
We left the Lord in heaven and we left the fiends  
in hell,  
We weren't exactly Yussufs but—Zuleika didn't  
tell.

This incident was that I hired a Mexican woman to do my laundry work and when she sent her daughter for the clothes I noticed that the girl, who was about eighteen and very pretty, had a fair complexion, blue eyes and light hair. A day